



Bureau: Bureau of Land Management

BLM Nevada's Veteran Hand Crews a Win for the BLM, Veterans, and DOI's Diversity Change Agent Program

You've probably read about the success of the Bureau of Land Management's all-veteran hand crews, a pilot program of the BLM Fire and Aviation Directorate that began in Nevada and has spread to other states. But what you may not know is how Nevada's Southern District office established the crew and the role that DOI's Diversity Change Agent program played in helping to make success possible.

The program began with the vision of Tim Murphy, assistant director of Fire and Aviation and a BLM diversity change agent. Several years ago, Murphy joined the department's Diversity Change Agent Program, a secretarial initiative created to foster a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming Department of the Interior. As a DCA, Murphy connected diversity recruitment and retention initiatives with the BLM's ongoing hiring needs during fire season.

For Murphy, hiring veterans for hand crews was a win-win strategy for the BLM and veterans alike. The BLM could diversify its workforce while hiring military veterans who were well-equipped for the job. Veterans have the skills, discipline, team focus, and attention to safety that are critical in the dangerous work of firefighting. On the other hand, veterans could find immediate employment opportunities through the Veterans Hiring Authority and other veterans hiring appointments.

But in October 2011, the SNDO wasn't focused on increasing workforce diversity; they simply needed qualified firefighters for the upcoming fire season. As Mel Meier, SNDO associate director, and Chris Delaney, acting district fire management officer, discussed hiring needs, they considered the possibility of hiring veterans based on the success of the Veterans Green Corps and Tim Murphy's ongoing recommendation — it made good business sense.



2011 Class of BLM Diversity Change Agents. Photo by BLM.

A Mind-Expanding Experience

In November 2011, Mel Meier attended the FranklinCovey DCA Training where she learned about the importance of a diverse workforce. She learned to: link diversity to business results; adjust to changing demographics; effectively challenge unproductive beliefs and stereotypes; recognize the value of each employee's unique contribution; and lead and work effectively with diverse teams.

"Before the training," Meier said, "I understood the business case for hiring veterans for crews." On that last morning, however, she understood that hiring veterans was "the right thing to do." With her new perspective and information about flexible hiring authorities, Meier returned to the office — ready to use the Veterans Hiring Authority as a tool for filling mission-critical jobs in firefighting.

As Meier and Delaney further discussed outreach and recruitment ideas, Meier expressed her belief that the workforce should reflect the face of the public it served. It was an awareness that Meier gained during the training. "Funny," Delaney responded, "Because on fire calls we've been talking to Tim about his big idea of hiring veteran hand crews." Meier and Delaney finally realized that the winning recruitment equation was matching unique fire staffing needs with returning veterans — good

business sense and the right thing to do.

The SNDO applied to host one of the crews, a decision that brought new challenges. The most obvious was: How do we do this?

Trail Blazing

Both Meier and Delaney knew that leadership support was essential to the program's success. They first approached Nevada state director Amy Lueders and Rex McKnight, then acting Nevada associate state director, with their proposal; both readily granted their support.

Next, they presented the National Interagency Fire Center with a solid business plan. John Glenn, division chief of Fire Operations, required them to justify their request. For example, NIFC felt strongly that crews should be stationed near fire project work. Meier and Delaney explained that their proposed fire station, Las Vegas, Nev., was home to many veterans' resources and services: a Veterans Affairs hospital, affordable housing, and veterans out-processing centers that were in close proximity to the BLM's Human Resources HR staff.

As they waited for NIFC's approval, the SNDO team laid the groundwork for the opportunity that they hoped would come.

They immersed themselves in details. They identified local career fairs. They visited military bases and learned about the discharge process. At the VA, they learned more about the VRA so that they could simplify it for applicants and hiring managers. Finally, the local BLM graphics department developed information packets, brochures, business cards, posters, and a YouTube recruitment message for the program. They were ready.

Once NIFC granted approval for the program, the SNDO fire team cheered, and in three teams, piled into their trucks and headed down the road. HR assistant Primitivo Soltero, also a veteran, assisted with his connections and military knowledge.

In a single day at Camp Pendleton, one team made contact with more than 500 veterans. Out of the thousands of applications and hundreds of veterans contacted, they interviewed 50 and selected 20.



BLM's Mel Meier and NIFC's Chris Delaney recruiting veterans at Camp Pendleton. Photo by BLM.

"It was overwhelming," Delaney said, remembering looking out over a sea of faces at a vast, untapped workforce.

And it was exhilarating. "But I don't think I've ever been that exhausted," Meier said.

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The Right Stuff

Just weeks later, the BLM welcomed the fire crew, with an understanding that the veterans have "the right stuff" for the job.

"Veterans have skills that fit well in a fire group," said Mary Jo Rugwell, SNDO manager.

Then acting state fire management officer Paul Petersen agreed. "Firefighting is like a military operation," he said. "It involves a chain-of-command structure under stressful conditions in a dynamic environment."

Team cohesion is also essential and is a concept veterans have relied on in combat. "They work

effectively from the newest recruit to the most seasoned crew member.” Murphy said. “They watch out for each other and anticipate and recognize weak signals of possible failure.”

“As firefighters they continue to put their lives on the line,” Delaney said. The fire culture echoes the military culture, which is to protect and serve in the face of danger.



BLM Southern Nevada District Office Veteran hand crew. Photo by DOI.

A Bright Future

Rugwell believes hand crews bring veterans the promise of a bright future. “It could be a good start for a career at BLM,” she said.

Petersen pointed out the many advantages. “Veterans have the GI bill. They can go up the fire ranks or be exposed to a variety of other career avenues.”

Veterans are hired as term employees with the hope they will convert to full time, which will open the door for other veterans. Thus, crews can serve as portals for veterans’ hiring and advancement.

In the meantime, these veterans see the fire crews as a good fit that facilitates their transition to civilian life with PT on the clock, benefits, training, and travel.

Lessons Learned

“So many people said it couldn’t be done,” Meier said as she recalled the many roadblocks and naysayers. But having developed good working relationships with other states proved valuable when

a need for help occurred. For example, when they lacked the expensive servicing vehicles needed to carry the crew and equipment, another state with excess vehicles made them available on loan.

The program's success was made possible by a committed multi-state team effort, leadership buy-in, and a solid recruitment strategy that provided the infrastructure support veterans needed.

Creating New Opportunities

The goal was to hire the right people for the right jobs. The diversity that veterans brought with their widely varied backgrounds and skill sets was an unplanned benefit.

BLM's first all-veteran hand crew in SNDO is an example of how organizational leadership and DCA insight meshed to create new opportunities to increase diversity in the work force. Meier acknowledged that being a DCA changed her way of thinking and "took it to a different level."

The SNDO uses the VRA for other hiring needs as well. "We've learned how to target our recruitment strategy to get the candidate pool we need," Meier said.

The SNDO credits its success to the work of many, but it didn't happen by focusing on numbers. It happened by seeing old problems with new eyes and by having a mindset that turned challenges into opportunities for the BLM.

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